

Learning Uncut Disruption Series
Michelle Ockers – Using Podcasts for Learning Delivery
Hosted by Dave Stokes



Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to another episode in the Learning Uncut Disruption Series, providing practical tips and guidance on alternatives to face-to-face training for people to consider including in their blend as they respond to the impact of COVID-19.

Michelle Ockers:

Today's episode is about podcasting. And because I had been podcasting for a couple of years now, I thought I was well positioned to provide you with practical tips and guidance, but rather than sit here and just talk at you, I've invited my editor, Dave Stokes, to interview me today.

Dave Stokes:

Welcome to another episode of the Learning Uncut Disruption Series. I'm your host today, Dave Stokes from author2audio. I'm an audio and podcast producer.

Dave Stokes:

Today's episode is Learning Unplugged. Today, we'll be taking an inward look at online strategies and formats for learning professionals. We'll be turning the tables a little bit on Michelle today and learning something about Michelle's story.

Dave Stokes:

Good morning, Michelle. Now tell me, is it a relief or a chore to being interviewed?

Michelle Ockers:

I think it's actually easier being the one doing the interviewing. I've been on podcasts before and I'm just more familiar with it. It's great to be having a conversation though.

Dave Stokes:

Lovely. Good to hear, nice to hear. I'll be gentle.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you.

Dave Stokes:

Michelle, we hear a brief insight into your accomplishments in the podcast intro for Learning Uncut, but I think I'd love to hear a little more about you and your passion for learning and development.

Michelle Ockers:

Dave, I'd like to tell two short stories which I think kind of give the flavor of why learning matters so much for me and why I get so much joy from working in the field. First is a kind of a bit of a childhood, an origin story. My parents come from Europe, from Germany and Holland. They were post World War II migrants to Australia. Both very smart people, but just with family circumstances, they both left school at the age of 14 to help out their families, to go to work. They had to grow up a bit faster than probably most kids do today.

Michelle Ockers:

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I always had a sense that this limited their options in life later on because they never got to complete a formal education. I always had access to a really good education, including university. I had opportunities because of education that they never had.

Michelle Ockers:

So I've got this core belief about the value of learning and that everybody has the right to learn and grow, that learning should be really accessible to everyone. But for a long time... Because I was brought up through the formal education system and it suited me, I excelled in that system, then I joined the Air Force, which of course is very structured for obvious reasons. That's what I thought learning was all about, was doing it in formal settings.

Michelle Ockers:

Fast forward to 2014. I was working for Coca-Cola Amatil at the time and going to conferences, I was hearing a lot about Twitter, about social learning and I thought, I just can't get my head around this Twitter thing. Why are people telling me I should be on Twitter, that it's great for my development? I thought I need a guide, I need someone to help me get started. So I enrolled in one of Jane Hart's programs. Some of our other disruption guests had mentioned Jane. At the time it was called the Social Learning Practitioner Programme.

Michelle Ockers:

First task on that program was to start a blog, second task was to blog about starting a blog and to share that on Twitter. You had to get involved with Twitter chats, show your work, which one of our other guests, Jane Bozarth, has talked about showing your work. But I would tell you, it was like a switch had been turned on for me.

Michelle Ockers:

It just transformed how I work, how I learn, opened up my network, allowed me to really rapidly accelerate my own development and to bring a wider range of approaches to learning into my organization. If you like to kind of role model and adapt some of this connective learning, helping people in my organization to connect with others, setting up communities of practice, these social and informal learning approaches, which we're able to add to the mix alongside training programs, a more formal learning.

Michelle Ockers:

What I realized was this approach to learning, this informal connected approach truly does make learning accessible to everyone. The internet obviously has just democratized learning in ways that we never could have imagined without it. So there's a couple of stories which I think talk to my passion, why it's important and in particular why I advocate so strongly for such a wide range of approaches to learning, Dave.

Dave Stokes:

Fantastic, Michelle. That's really interesting. My parents are of the postwar generation and had a similar emphasis on education. So it's quite curious that, I think our, sort of, Gen X, Baby Boomers generation, we've had these great opportunities for learning which had been created by parents who for whatever reason haven't been able to afford those opportunities during their own upbringing, and then for us to take all that structured learning and to start unpacking it and breaking it down into less formal learning structures. It's interesting to hear your viewpoint on that one, Michelle.

Dave Stokes:

I guess, now that the Learning Uncut podcast is coming up to its 50th episode.



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Michelle Ockers:

Hey.

Dave Stokes:

Yeah. Fantastic. So tell me what started you down the podcasting path and what has the journey been like?

Michelle Ockers:

I started because I was getting value out of being a listener of podcasts. It was one of the approaches to learning I added to my repertoire. I love a good conversation. I love being able to connect with people and find out about their work and learn from that. So I had this idea mulling around in my head for a few years. It was kind of like an itch that wouldn't go away and I kept thinking it seems like too big an undertaking. It seems a bit overwhelming.

Michelle Ockers:

But I was able to connect with two other people who were also interested in doing a podcast. I didn't want to go and just create more noise, so I wanted to find a format, a style, something that would add value for people, would be a contribution, if you like. And when I got talking with Karen and Amanda about our ideas of what that might look like, the format we ended up with... We just all loved the idea of helping others in our profession to showcase their work and to share stories that really highlighted the progressive stuff as well as maybe the more traditional stuff that learning professionals are doing which has an impact. And the timing was perfect for me. We started the podcast in early 2018, published our first episode mid 2018.

Michelle Ockers:

The other motivator for me was that I embarked on a big road trip at the start of 2018. I left Sydney, got rid of nearly everything I owned, took my daughter out of a school yard and put her in distance education, and we wanted to shake life up a bit. So I headed off on a road trip, not knowing how long I would travel or where I would stop. It felt like a really great way for me to stay connected to what others in my profession were doing. It's like the perfect excuse for me to reach out to any learning professional anywhere in the world, right, and say, "Tell me about your work." So from a personal perspective, it's been an amazing opportunity.

Dave Stokes:

Fantastic. I guess, we can't [inaudible 00:08:28]... An amazing experience for your daughter too, I imagine. How old was she at the time?

Michelle Ockers:

She was 13 at the time. She's 15 now.

Dave Stokes:

Okay. So 13, so quite mature. All right. So we're talking in recent years.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Dave Stokes:



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In the podcast format, we've kind of got a hybrid kind of situation where it's kind of a passive learning, but it's also engaging for the fact that you're actually listening in, so a fly on the wall to a conversation that someone is having during a podcast. So what do you think makes a good podcast episode?

Michelle Ockers:

I think, some preparation makes a good podcast episode. Podcasts that go on for too long and drift can lose the attention and focus, certainly for me as a listener. So interesting guests, a clear point or purpose or focus for the conversation, a nice balance, assuming of course that the style is an interview style, a nice balance of interactions or conversational balance between the host and the guest. Not all podcasts are conversational, of course. So if you are going to start a podcast, thinking about the style.

Michelle Ockers:

But I think generally, to keep them punchy and to be consistent, relatively consistent with your style, whatever that style is. Some are panels, sometimes you have solo experts who are giving tips, sometimes it's repurposed content. There's one I listen to, which is a guy who reads other people's blogs with their permission, of course, but I think being clear on what you're doing and why you're doing it.

Michelle Ockers:

Good audio quality is essential. I have stopped listening to some podcasts because the audio quality is too poor. And I think working with a good editor. And if people haven't cottoned on, Dave, who's interviewing me today, is actually my editor and does a great job. And I've got to say, I am not a fan of ads in podcasts.

Dave Stokes:

Yeah. I agree with that comment. I think, it's very free and democratic among the podcasting space. I think that really helps with credibility. But it's also, you might wonder whether there's a hidden agenda. So I like the altruism of podcasts being free.

Dave Stokes:

So if somebody was wanting to start a podcast, what sorts of things would they be thinking about first in addition to the things you've already mentioned before about conversational versus more lecture style podcast, what are your suggestions there?

Michelle Ockers:

I think, start with knowing your purpose, and who your audience is, and what's going to be of value to them. So maybe you've been having some conversations, talking to people saying, "Here's my idea. You're kind of my ideal target listener." I'm talking to learning professionals here predominantly on this episode. So learning professionals know how to do that work, how to do their upfront analysis, how to maybe create some personas, understand pain points, motivations, to really get clear on what's the purpose of this podcast and what's the value add.

Michelle Ockers:

I think figuring out what your format is, is really important. If you're going to have guests, be aware that you'll need to do some work to make guests comfortable. Make sure you've got a process for briefing them on how they can prepare, indeed, if any preparation is required. Some people like to prepare, some people just are happy to turn up. I use a frequently asked questions document for guests, which I send them. I always do a preparation session with guests about a week before the actual recording to get very clear with them on what

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we're going to discuss. If they think there are any particular points that are going to be a real value to the audience, my job as the host is to help them tell their story. So if the interview style of podcast is what you're looking for, that's important.

Michelle Ockers:

With tools, the tools don't need to be really specialized. There are some things to experiment with and get right. But, Dave, you and I did some experimentation with audio quality and improving audio quality when we first started working together and I had invested in a specialist microphone, which it turns out I wasn't using properly at all because I hadn't taken the time to do a lot of experimentation to record it, speaking with it in different positions to really understand how to use it well. And it turned out, when we did a series of experiments, the actual plugin headphone for my phone was actually going to produce the best quality for me. That may not be the case for everyone, but play around with your technology. You can keep it simple. I use Zoom and Audacity for my recordings and they do the job just fine. So play around with your tools, experiment, improve. Have a simple, repeatable workflow that you can just use so you're not having to think about process all the time.

Michelle Ockers:

I think they're probably the main tips for getting started. The editing process... Amanda, when she was working with me, used to use Audacity for the editing. I did the editing a couple of times. I've found it quite finicky, but again, that may be a matter of practice. What tools do you use for editing, Dave?

Dave Stokes:

I do use Audacity, same as Amanda did, Michelle. One of the great attractions for someone starting out in business of Audacity, in particular, was that it was a free application. So, there's no cost associated with Audacity and it's really stood the test of time. I've pushed it in lots of different directions and it seems to cope really well with very simple tasks but also more complex ones.

Dave Stokes:

But as you pointed out before, Michelle, there's always that kind of glazed over look that we all get when we first open up a new application and try and learn it and just make friends with it. That all important testing phase you were talking to regarding the quality of your audio and that sort of stuff, you'll find that as well with Audacity. But I'm certainly very happy to help people to get them started.

Dave Stokes:

Once you can zero in, and again a structure is important, as you said, a format, once you zero in on the things that you need, then it's really quite a simple set of processes that are repeatable each week. Just to pick up on your format point, I think there's something quite comfortable about consistency, there's a recognition also. So if your podcast generally begins in the same way, then it's like a doorbell that sort of tunes you in and brings you into the zone for the next episode. I think it helps, consistency helps with following, too, and also with a reasonable audio level as well, so you're not having to scramble around with your phone turning it up or even worse, still having to turn it down because it's too loud. So they're the sorts of things.

Dave Stokes:

Michelle, I'm not sure if we're on the same ground here, but I think... The stats say there's something like 65% of people are visual learners and about 30% of us are auditory learners and the remainder, what's that, 5%? It's a kinesthetic kind of activity.

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Michelle Ockers:

Now, Dave, you're treading on to dangerous territory here with learning styles.

Dave Stokes:

Have I? Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. Yes. This one's been debunked in the learning profession.

Dave Stokes:

Oh, really? Okay. So how many auditories are [crosstalk 00:16:17]... Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Some people may have preferences for absorbing information in certain ways, but in terms from a learning perspective, there is no research which demonstrates that your preferences for how you take in information actually impact the effectiveness of your learning of that informational content.

Dave Stokes:

How interesting.

Michelle Ockers:

So, that's an interesting one. But yeah, look, a lot of people like video. Video is still really hot. You just have to look at the rise of it on YouTube. So I guess your question is around when to use video, when to use audio and what are the pros and cons of each.

Dave Stokes:

Yeah. Podcast, exactly. Podcast versus vodcast. For people who don't know the distinction, a podcast is strictly audio, but a vodcast includes audio and video, hence the V for vodcasts. What are your thoughts there, Michelle, on the visual learning aspect?

Michelle Ockers:

I think, start with understanding the audience and the problem that you're trying to address or the opportunity you're trying to address is the first place. And then decide what formats are suitable. No matter what the need is or... We're not just talking vodcast or podcast, could be any range of approach to support people with learning or communicating and getting information out, but specifically with vodcast versus podcast. I do use video as well as audio in my work.

Michelle Ockers:

I think accessibility and flexibility is important. I think podcast, a lot of people listen to podcasts when they're doing other things, walking, gardening, washing the dishes and they are very flexible. I think, they're very versatile in terms of publication channels. It's just an audio file, you can publish it in a whole range of ways. It doesn't need to be through a fancy platform and through iTunes, particularly.

Michelle Ockers:

When we're talking internal podcasting as well, and I do want to say a few things about the internal use of podcasts before we wrap up, Dave.

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Dave Stokes:

Sure.

Michelle Ockers:

I think they are great for storytelling. If you don't have to demonstrate something and if there's not, like, bullet pointed information you're needing to get across, they can be an excellent format because you can do a lot just with voice if that's going to be accessible to people. You do miss body language, but then again you're not distracted by the body language.

Michelle Ockers:

I think there's an issue of reach as well. A lot of people are uncomfortable in front of a video camera. They worry about their appearance. When you're talking audio, it still does take a little while for people to get used to the sound of their own voice.

Dave Stokes:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

But when you're talking audio, I think a lot more people are going to be comfortable doing an audio interview rather than a video interview. It takes a little bit of the tension out of it.

Michelle Ockers:

The other thing is like... This kind of segues into a discussion around how you might use audio or podcasting internally. If you think about reach, you could get a senior leader or a subject matter expert on audio and get that audio out. If you compare it to just written word, for certain types of messaging, you can get a wider range of communication into an audio in that you've got voice and tone as well rather than just words. And because it is so flexible and easy to listen to on a phone, in particular, you could potentially get a wider reach with a short audio than with asking everybody to stop and watch a video.

Michelle Ockers:

That kind of brings me to how might you use podcasts or audio right now and into the future, one is obviously for messaging and communications, another is for this idea of showing your work. Jane Bozarth talked about this yesterday. The podcast style I do is case studies, storytelling, talking through issues, problems, challenges, here's how I solved this.

Michelle Ockers:

There's an amazing podcast from Dr. Amantha Imber called How I Work, where she gets a guest who talks about literally how they work, how they plan their day, how they do particular tasks. I think that could be a great way for capturing how people are doing their work and their work processes and sharing it. Another interesting application, thinking of a riff on the case study thing, would be customer success stories from a marketing perspective, and getting out stories about things your customers are doing with you or with your product, which could help to get word out.

Michelle Ockers:

There's some of my thoughts on, I guess, vodcast versus podcasts versus other mediums and why podcast and audio might be useful. Audio is not unfamiliar to learning professionals, particularly those who are using e-learning. I mean, we use our voice as an instrument all the time and that's very much the case for people who maybe have been face-

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to-face trainers and a lot of e-learning modules include audio snippets, voiceovers, that sort of thing. So it's a familiar medium, which I think we could be leveraging more right now as we move into the digital space, Dave.

Dave Stokes:

Absolutely. It's great, Michelle. I guess, biologically, we're steeped in this enormous history of oral storytelling, anything from grunting and pointing over to the possible prey available on the Savannah to the elaborate languages that are developed throughout the world that storytelling and social learning are just massive, massive parts of our whole learning and education paradigm. Would you agree with that?

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. There's a lot of emphasis on storytelling for learning at the moment, as well as for other purposes in the corporate space. The guys at Anecdote, and we'll put a link to them in the show notes, they do a great job. They've been working for many years with helping leaders to tell their stories. So I think they'd be worth checking out.

Michelle Ockers:

Dave, you obviously listen to a lot of podcasts because you're editing them, right, as well as audio books.

Dave Stokes:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

As someone who's working with people producing podcasts, what tips do you have? What working practices do you see them employing that make for a good podcast?

Dave Stokes:

Well, I think you probably hit most of them in your responses, Michelle, actually. I think, if I can perhaps use... If you don't mind, I'll use a negative example, is that the podcasts that I don't really like listening to when there's no controversy and no debate. For instance, listening to two experts complimenting each other on how wonderful they both are and how marvelously well-educated they are is not necessarily of great interest to me because there's a... Listening to people agree with each other for half an hour, to me, from my own just perspective, I'd like to see some debate, I would like to see some counterpoint, people with different opinions. The same situation, how is it handled differently by the two individuals, or along the paradigm of Learning Uncut, which is about listening to learning professionals who've got a whole bunch of experiences to share and story tell about.

Dave Stokes:

I always find it a bit hard to answer this question without sounding a bit weird or a bit elitist. But I think for me, podcasts that have some good debates and challenge and some varying opinions, I think, are the most interesting because they then encourage the listener to go out and do some more of their own research. Right or wrong, I think, as humans we tend to identify differences and then we'll challenge those differences and see what part of it works for us. We might have five different suggestions and two of those, we'll take onboard and actually use. I like a bit of healthy debate, argument, and even outright disagreement.

Michelle Ockers:

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Yes, yes. Well, you've just given me another idea for how you might use a podcast to promote collaboration in your organization, and that is by getting two or three people together who've had to figure out how to work together across different departments and have found better ways of working together. You can talk about some of the tensions and the different perspectives they all brought to an issue or problem, that perspective.

Dave Stokes:

Wonderful idea. Yeah. Exactly. Personality differences and all those sorts of things. We manage through patience and tolerance and understanding and listening to glue all this stuff together. But it's really a big smooth highway. There's often quite a few bumps to negotiate.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So people, get into it, storytelling via podcast. Awesome way to promote all sorts of objectives in your organization.

Dave Stokes:

There we go. There we go, right there. Well that's wonderful, Michelle. Look, if you don't mind winding up, and again we've probably covered this during the course of our discussion, but I'm just wondering if you've got any specific suggestions for learning professionals at the moment who are... that they may be facing or probably certainly are facing a lot of cancellations, both in the now and going forward. What do you think learning professionals can be doing now to pivot their offering?

Michelle Ockers:

I think, staying calm, going back to fundamentals of good practice in learning, using evidence-based approaches, understanding the need, understanding the audience and then looking at what's the best approach. That whole Megan Torrance in her Learning Uncut Disruption episode spoke about the iterative approach. I think that was really sound advice. So moving relatively quickly but doing it smartly, and I think we know how to do that.

Dave Stokes:

Yeah, tremendous. That sounds great, Michelle. Well, thank you so much. I mean, would you like a last word? Is there anything that we haven't covered that you'd like to mention?

Michelle Ockers:

I think I've had enough words. Thanks, Dave.

Dave Stokes:

Okay. Next episode, Michelle will be back in the director's chair. Thank you for all being patient with me. Thank you so much for all your time, Michelle, and those wonderful insights.

Michelle Ockers:

Thanks, Dave.

Dave Stokes:

Look forward to speaking again soon.

Michelle Ockers:

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Bye.

Dave Stokes:

Bye.